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Seeing Aboriginal history in black and white: the contested history of the Stolen Generation

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Abstract: The forced removal of Indigenous children has been a site of historical debate in Australia since the 1980s. This paper explores these debates and discusses the political nature of Australia's national history, and the correlation between child removal and the legitimacy of the nation.

Keywords: Stolen Generations; history wars; Aboriginal history; Bringing Them Home report

The forced removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children has been a site of lively debate in academic historical discourse since at least the 1980s, when Peter Read coined the term '*The Stolen Generations*.' (Read 1981) Policies of child removal and systematic discrimination, assimilation and genocide (Tatz 2001) at large have, however been the source of intergenerational trauma, and painful history transmitted through Aboriginal families and communities since colonization. The fact that these oral histories did not become a part of an official historical conversation and record in this country until the late twentieth century points to the ways in which power and race have shaped, and continue to shape the sanctioned Australian narrative, and whose voices it includes.

This paper will explore the divergent and divisive narratives about forced removal of Indigenous children that have emerged, primarily what have come to be known as the 'white blindfold' and 'black armband' historical camps. It will then discuss the distinctly presentist and political nature of Australia's national history, and the correlation between child removal and the legitimacy of the nation. Finally, it will conclude with a consideration about how historical narrative and authority are refracted through race and power.



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Black Stories, White Stories

Following the foregrounding of conversations around indigenous rights and history within mainstream social, political and historical discourse, the 1990s were witness to significant events of legal and political progress for Indigenous Australians. The Landmark Mabo judgment of 1992 (where the doctrine of *terra nullius* was overturned,) and the *Bringing Them Home* report released in 1997, contributed to an already fertile political atmosphere in which the historical narrative of this nation had been subject to greater contestation than ever before. (Veracini 2003)

Movements seeking to stake out ‘truth in history’ emerged from both sides of the political spectrum, revealing the increasingly direct correlation between national history and instructive political and ideological agendas. Both political ‘camps’ if you will, endorsed historical narratives they deemed most appropriate for Australia to bring with it into the new century. (Brawley 1999)

The ‘White Blindfold’ movement, as it has come to be known (Brantlinger 2004), was spearheaded within the discipline of academic history by Keith Windschuttle and Geoffrey Blainey, with the political leadership and support of the then Prime Minister John Howard. The narrative favored by Windschuttle and Blainey lent itself to the ideological ideals of the conservative right, their work aiming to disrupt the push for historical and political recognition of the injustices suffered by Indigenous people that gained prevalence in the late twentieth century. Blainey argued that what he labelled the ‘Black Armband’ view of history was all too reactionary, and represented “a swing of the pendulum from a position that had been too favorable, too self-congratulatory, to an opposite extreme that is even more unreal and decidedly jaundiced.” (Blainey 1993, p. 12)

Windschuttle sought to undermine the integrity and accuracy of this ‘Black Armband’ movement, targeting historians such as Henry Reynolds, Lyndall Ryan and Peter Read with accusations of flawed and inaccurate historical practice. Windschuttle and Blainey also claimed that the historical narrative presented by historians in the opposing camp developed an exaggerated narrative with intention to tarnish the reputation of the country and encourage a guilt industry. (Morgan 1988, pp. 20-24) Windschuttle claimed his own work was “a defense of the integrity of both the nation itself and the civilization from which it derives” (Windschuttle 2003, p. 29), echoing Blainey’s position that despite a ‘few mistakes’ in early colonial history, Australia remained “one of the world’s success stories.” (Blainey 2016, p. 335)

Historians from both sides recognise that the dialogue has implications beyond the scope of historical theory, bare facts, or the past, raising questions about the legitimacy of the modern Australian nation. The ‘White Armband’ historical narrative was endorsed by many Australians who would prefer to maintain the ‘positive’ historical narrative which has long been an “established feature of the Australian consciousness” (Veracini 2003, p. 223), what Reynolds labeled the “white picket fence” historical view. (Reynolds 2013, p. 121) On a political, social and economic level, many feared the present implications and challenges of recognising a not so ‘positive’ narrative.

This same defense of the nation can be seen in Blainey’s response to the *Wik* Decision of 1997, a second significant win for Indigenous Land rights. He condemned the decision, penning an article

in which he claimed that Native Title was a product of the “Black Armband” movement which put Australia’s future at risk. As he wrote:

So long as the black armband view is influential — so long as it insists that the treatment of Aborigines was so disgraceful that no reparations might be adequate, that no reconciliation can be certain of success, and that black racism is justified — then Australia’s future as a legitimate nation is in doubt. (Blainey 1997, p. 22)

The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission’s (HREOC) *Bringing Them Home* Report, released in 1997, attracted significant criticism from the ‘White Armband’ historians, for the unprecedented weight and authority it gave to the oral testimony of indigenous victims and witnesses. So too, the framing of Indigenous child removal within the broader International human rights context prompted agitation and backlash from the conservative historical community and the “parochial” Right. (Haebich 2011, p. 1035) The HREOC had appointed Indigenous hearing commissioners in every state and territory. Testimony was heard in each capital city and many regional areas of Australia. (HREOC 1997, p. 15) It took testimony from 535 Indigenous people and concluded that between one and three and one in ten Indigenous children had been forcibly removed as a part of official government policy to remove ‘the black stain from the Australian population.’ (HREOC 1997, p. 31)

The Inquiry also established that removal was part of a larger assimilation policy Australia-wide, the intention of which was to render Aboriginal Australians ‘extinct’ as a distinct race. Moreover, ensuring that Aboriginal people did not constitute a distinct people was a political project. Mr Neville, Chief Protector of WA was quoted in the Brisbane Telegraph in 1937 stating:

Within a hundred years the pure black will be extinct... there were over 60,000 full-blooded natives in Western Australia. Today there are only 20,000. In time there will be none. But the half-caste problem was increasing every year [...] The pure blooded Aboriginal was not a quick breeder. On the other hand the half-caste was. In Western Australia there were half-caste families of twenty and upwards. That showed the magnitude of the problem. (HREOC 1997, p. 24)

The ‘White Armbands’ argued that the report lacked political objectivity and reliability, with Windschuttle disputing the use of the term ‘stolen generations’ and accusing the HREOC of producing baseless statistics. (Windschuttle 2009) Windschuttle concluded that “Aboriginal Children were never removed from their families ... to serve any improper government policy or program. The small numbers of Aboriginal child removals in the twentieth century were almost all based on traditional grounds of child welfare.” (Windschuttle 2010)

In contrast, *Bringing Them Home* was heralded by historians and applauded by members of the Australian public on the other side of the debate, for its foregrounding of Indigenous testimony. Historians on the Left applauded the Commission for legitimizing Indigenous histories and voices, which they argued had been silenced and omitted from the dominant Australian historical narrative for far too long. (Stanner 1969, pp. 24-25).

Of course, indigenous people had been seeking to have their voices heard and to bring the story of child removal to the attention of the broader Australian public. For example, the documentary *Lousy Little Sixpence*, which documented child removal and in the 1930s, was broadcast in 1983 on the ABC inciting an unprecedented public outcry that resulted in the memoir on which the film was based becoming recommended reading for high school history students nationwide. (Celermajer 2014) Later that year, the historical drama series *Women of the Sun* recounted stories of removal and assimilation. In the late 1980s and early 1990s mainstream publishing companies began to take an interest in autobiographical and memoirs which foregrounded child removal and the Aboriginal experience at large. Novels such as Sally Morgan's *My Place* were highly acclaimed and reached audiences across the world. (Morgan 1987)

These publications and films, based on the voices of Indigenous peoples, opened up space for indigenous storytelling to extend beyond the communities in which the stories originated and into white Australia. These texts entered the dialogue around Australian history which had for so long been dominated only by the stories of White Australians, bringing the history of removal into everyday discourse. The increasing presence of indigenous stories in popular culture, as well as a political climate that was coming alive to the Indigenous reality, surely contributed to the increasingly positive reception of Indigenous narratives amongst non-Indigenous Australians. This broader background no doubt also influenced the decision of the progressive leaning Keating Government to provide a reference to the HREOC to undertake a National Inquiry into the forced removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Nevertheless, the fact that it had taken so long, despite the plethora of Indigenous voices, tells us something important about the relationship between history and race in Australia. The Aboriginal narrative was not absent but rather ignored, until amplified by the predominantly white academy. Already well earlier in the twentieth century, the great anthropologist, W.E.H. Stanner had argued that the meta narrative of Australian history which had been entrenched throughout the 19th and 20th century not only omitted the indigenous experience, but was "a cult of forgetfulness." Stanner argued that what may have begun as an omission of other perspectives, soon became a nationwide silence resulting in the production of a historical narrative that "conveniently forgot the darker history of colonization and dispossession." (Stanner 1969, p. 22) Drawing on a concept from Roland Barthes, Inga Clendinnen described the impact of this historical movement, towards an inclusive and diverse, albeit not so proud Australian history, as prompting the nation to 'wake out of forgetfulness.' (Clendinnen 1998, p. 203)

Historians following in the wake of Stanner intended to disrupt this 'silence' and comprehensively challenge the official narrative of modern Australia as a legitimate sovereign nation founded on egalitarian principles and practices. The inclusion of indigenous stories that diverged from this narrative, and the authorization of these accounts within 'officially sanctioned' historical records and government inquiries (HREOC) challenged not only the historical narrative itself, but also raised broader questions about the production and practice of history. This was no doubt a positive move for Indigenous peoples, but it remains true that only when recognized historians, who were almost all non-indigenous and male, began to insist on a history that included the abuse of indigenous people, was there even recognition that there was a contest.

History is about the present

In his book, *Life Together, A Life Apart*, Bain Atwood points to the distinctly ‘presentist’ nature of Aboriginal History. Whilst history, by definition, exists in the past, Atwood illuminates the impact of its telling in a contemporary setting, and the ability, specifically of Aboriginal Oral History and storytelling, to enliven aspects of the present and alter our perception of the world as it is today. (Atwood 1990, p. 217) *Bringing Them Home* underlines the presentist nature of the history of the Stolen Generations when it states in its introduction, “The histories we trace are complex and pervasive. Most significantly the actions of the past resonate in the present and will continue to do so in the future.” (HREOC 1997)

Both Windschuttle and Atwood recognized the significant disruption that *Bringing Them Home* caused to the entrenched normative narrative of Australian history. The evidence and testimony that it documented both exposed the horrors of the past, and undermined the historical pride and patriotism that many white Australians had associated with the Nation’s past. Atwood claimed that Australia and Australianess “was realised through and rests upon the conventional historical narrative” and that an end to this history constituted, for many Australians, an end to the nation as they knew it. (Atwood 1996, p. 116) Windschuttle’s reaction the report illustrates this point, saying that whilst debates amongst historians may concern facts about, and interpretations of the past, their impact reaches into the present and concerns “the character of the Australian nation and the caliber of the civilization that Britain brought to these shores in 1788”. (Windschuttle 2003, p. 29) *Bringing Them Home* itself echoes this idea of history as presentist, “the histories we trace are complex and pervasive. Most significantly the actions of the past resonate in the present and will continue to do so in the future.” (HREOC 1997) Mick Dodson, who was the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner at the time report was written, has elucidated the lasting impact of removal and the trauma of removal. Dodson reiterates the findings of the report, that a loss of indigenous identity as well as the severing of family and community ties has resulted in significant mental health and substance abuse issues within the Indigenous community, the impacts of which are felt by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children today, whom are still removed by government institutions, and the Juvenile Justice System at an alarmingly high rate. Dodson writes, “The effects of removal have been generational and they continue to reverberate through our communities.” (Dodson 2010, p. 6)

Just as processes of remembering have a dimension that exists in the present, and the future, so too, Wessel and Moulds have theorised that the exercise of conscious forgetting facilitates the “shaping and maintenance of a group’s identity (past, present, future) by adapting history, selecting what is stored from the present and choosing what direction to take.” (Wessel & Moulds 2008, p. 291)

For some, the increasing presence of Indigenous Histories and perspectives within Australian historical discourse poses a threat to nationhood and the Australian Identity in the present. The contestation of this metanarrative which results from the foregrounding of the indigenous experience, is seen as diminishing the character of Australia, and the way White Australians see themselves today. Windschuttle states “the debate over what happened to the Aborigines is not only about them. Ultimately, it is about the character of the Australian nation and the calibre of the civilisation that Britain brought to these shores in 1788.” (Windschuttle 2003, p. 29)

The 'presentist' and inherently political nature of history reveals why its contestation prevails in the present. The narrative of national history that dominates mainstream discourse has an impact on the identity of the nation in the present, and therefore an influence on how the country conducts itself now and how it orients itself for the future.

Judith Brett argued that the John Howard's refusal to apologise, as was recommended by *Bringing Them Home*, was not only aligned with the 'proud' history favoured by many of his supporters, but also facilitated a culture of 'guiltlessness' within modern Australia. The narrative he insisted upon by not apologising was that because the Howard government had not executed the removalist policies, it was not liable and ought not to apologise. (Brett 2000) Howard's staunch refusal to apologise, despite increasing public support for an apology, and the recommendations of the HREOC report, arguably perpetuated the denialism of 'the great Australian silence.' (Stanner 1969, pp. 20-25) Whilst Howard's primary objection to an apology was his belief that contemporary Australians should not apologise for actions for which they had no personal responsibility, he also defended policies of removal as well-intentioned, and on several occasions, applauded them as successful. (Celermajer 2009) Howard's stance towards Indigenous history and the responsibility of the Australian state to recognise that history was completely in keeping with his stance on contemporary Indigenous policy, as evidenced by his government's attempts to limit the recognition of Native Title and step away from Australia's historical record in promoting the recognition of Indigenous rights at the United Nations. (Robbins 2007)

Conclusion

What then do these vastly different narratives of Australia's past tell us? The continued contestation of the history of forced child removal in this country, and of relations between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians at large, reveals the fundamental relationship between how we recount the actions of the past and the legitimacy and identity of contemporary Australia. Today, the lively debates, and stark differences of opinion which characterise conversations about Australia's historical narrative reflect the relationship between historical narrative and the way individuals and communities perceive themselves in the present. The question remains: without sufficient reparative measures, or even a legitimate recognition of the abusive dimensions of Australia's history, how can we constitute ourselves as an egalitarian and rights respecting nation?

Perhaps in respect of Indigenous voices, I end this paper with the words of Loitja O'Donaghue, who had been the Chairperson of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, and was herself removed when she was only two years old. In a speech that she gave in 1997, the year that *Bringing Home* was released, she said:

Whether or not we knew it then, the national consensus that had overwhelmingly carried the 1967 referendum was breaking down, popular support for Indigenous programs retreating. If an easy-going tolerance is a hallmark of the Australian character, then Indigenous Australians seemed more and more to call forth the opposite.

At the core of this hostility lies a dispute about history. Many of today's Indigenous Australians see themselves as survivors. We base our identity in part on reminding other Australians that this country was built not just on egalitarianism and hard work, but also on theft and murder. (O'Donoghue 1997).

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